1: Childs M-5 (1924-1940) 1949 FP13 Mbundu FP13

Much of the soil has been greatly im-
134 poverished both by use and by the action of the weather. The most productive soil areas consist of alluvial deposits, but the precipitate nature of much of the region precludes the formation of such deposits. The bulk of the soil is rather poor, but still it is of better quality, on the whole, than in adjoining regions to the north, east, and south.[1]

133 In common with several of the African plateaux the Benguela Highland rises very precipitately from the sea. This is one of the most striking features of African geography. The steepness of the
[48] ascent forces the Benguela Railway to use a cog-line for a short distance. The village of Ngendo, described in the section dealing with the social structure, has an elevation of about 1,650 metres (5,400 feet) but is situated at only about 60 miles from the ocean.[2] That part of the intermediate zone which adjoins the Highland on the west consists of river valleys between mountain ridges and is well watered, but between that and the sea the country is very arid. This arid region is in reality a northern extension of the Kalahari, Omaheke, and Namieb deserts. Much of this arid stretch is exceedingly rough mountainous country. All along the African coast there is a coastal plain, but in the region under consideration it is very narrow. Plain and mountain are equally arid and this desert country generally has an elevation of less than 1,000 metres (about 3,280 feet). This intermediate zone is well known to the Ovimbundu and played an important role in the history of their commercial developments since they were obliged to cross it to reach the European stations on the coast.

101 Other adjoining regions have also been of importance to the Ovimbundu. It was from the region to the north between the Highland and the Kuanza River that some of the principal ruling families came. Across this same region the Ovimbundu had their
[177] first European contacts—with the Portuguese establishments on the Kuanza River. In the regions to the south live cattle-raising people whence the Ovimbundu got cattle, whether by raiding or
133 by trading. East of the Kuanza River valley the elevation drops
167 gradually toward the basins of the Congo and the Zambezi. When the slave- and rubber-trades led the Ovimbundu into this region

[1] i.e. of all adjoining regions only on the north-west are there valleys of superior soil. No complete survey of the soils of Angola has been made. Most books overrate the qualities of the soils of the colony.

[2] See *infra*, Chap. II.

1: Childs M-5 (1924-1940) 1949 FP 13 Mbundu FP 13

they came to call it *ofeka yonjala*, 'The Hungry Country' or better 'The Country of Hunger', since it was without inhabitants and consequently without the possibility of purchasing provisions.[1] Much of the soil in all three of these adjoining regions is very sandy and comparatively unproductive.

Many rivers find in the Benguela Highland a great catchment basin. The two largest are the Kuanza (Kuanja) and the Cunene (Kunene), both flowing into the Atlantic. Between them are the Queve (Keve, also marked 'Cuvo'), the Balombo, and the Catumbela (Katombela), which also reach the ocean. A peculiar stream is the Cubango (Kuvango or Okavango), which rises near the source of the Cunene, and after becoming a great and free-flowing river loses itself in the Kalahari desert. Some authorities hold that through the Chobe swamp it maintains a seasonal connexion with the Zambezi. In this event the springs of the Benguela Highland feed the waters of both oceans. The part played by the Mbuluvulu plain in Bié (Viye) has often been noted by travellers and writers, for it drains into the Kuanza and also into the Cubango. As with most of the Southern Bantu,[2] rivers have had little directly to do with building the material culture of the Ovimbundu. Watersheds have furnished trade-routes, and fishing has become a side-line occupation for those who live conveniently near the streams. The rivers themselves, however, have always been of the greatest importance to the mass of the people who are dependent upon them for water, whether it comes in the form of rainfall or is taken more directly from the streams.

Climate

The regions under consideration in this study belong to the South Central African zone of summer rains. Coming on the monsoon from the Indian Ocean, the rains are precipitated by cold winds from the south-western antarctic current.[3] The Benguela Highland constitutes a distinct climatic zone, as the fact of the altitude would lead one to infer. The adjoining and coastal regions

[1] Cf. H. W. Nevinson, *A Modern Slavery*, chap. vi (New York: Harpers, 1906); also M. Burr, *A Fossicker in Angola* (London: Adelphi, 1933).

[2] A. J. H. Goodwin, 'Habitat', p. 34, in Schapera, *The Bantu-Speaking Tribes of South Africa* (London: Routledge, 1937).

[3] See C. E. P. Brooks and S. T. A. Mirrlees, *A Study of the Atmospheric Circulation over Tropical Africa*. Meteorological Office. Geophysical memoirs no. 55 (London: H.M.S.O., 1932).

The two largest rivers flowing from the Highland are the Kwanza and the Kunene, both of which flow into the Atlantic Ocean. Between them are the Keve, the Balombo and the Katumbela. The Kubango rises near the source of the Kunene and flows southwards towards the Kalahari Desert.

SOILS AND VEGETATION

The foundation of the plateau is a vast slab of primeval crystalline rock, which frequently outcrops in the form of isolated rocks or of massive peaks. Some of these outcrops remain bare, while others are hidden by laterite and soil formed by rock decomposition. Sediments overlying the rocks include unfossiliferous sandstones and conglomerates, considered to be of Palaeozoic age. Much of the soil is poor, in many areas impoverished by use and by erosion; there are however a few alluvial deposits, and on the whole the soil is of better quality than in the adjoining regions to the east, north and south.

Differences in vegetation between the Highland and the lower zone towards the coast are striking. Characteristic feature of the coastal area is the baobab *(Adansonia digitata)* and in the better-watered areas tropical forests occur. The Highland proper was until recently well-covered with a variety of trees; today, however, except in isolated areas in Bailundu and other regions, grasslands have taken the place of forest and woodland. Native methods of agriculture and annual fires have caused much deforestation, and this has been accentuated by the demands of European settlement and of the Railway, which up to the present time uses principally wood for fuel.

CLIMATE

The Highland is well within the Tropical Zone, but altitude and the effect of the south-western Antarctic current combine to produce a moderate climate. The annual variation of temperature is relatively slight; a day's maximum is seldom above 90°F, and may be as low as 60°, but the usual maximum is around 80°. The minimum of 32° or even 30° is sometimes reached in the winter (about May 20th - July 20th), but more usually the minimum is 40° to 50° in the winter, and 50° to 55° for the rest of the year. There is considerably daily variation, especially in the winter, when differences of 42° are often registered.

Mean annual rainfall varies from 40 to 60 inches, according to region. In the Highland the rains begin with a few showers during September, increase during October and November, have a break of two to four weeks in December, January or February, and continue until the end of April. The heaviest falls are usually in November and December, occasionally in March.

TRADITIONS OF ORIGIN AND HISTORY(1)

The Ovimbundu people represent a fusion of diverse stocks, chiefly of the Southern Bantu and of the Congo or Central Bantu peoples. The ruling

(1) This section is a summary of the detailed account given by Childs 1949, pp.164-231.

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CHAPTER V

VILLAGE ECONOMICS

The homeland of the Ovimbundu, the Benguela Highland, is mostly over 4,000 feet above sea-level. Rainfall is 50–60 inches a year, and the rainy season is from September to April.[1] In this season after a downpour there is frequently a cooling of the air, and the most intense heat comes just before the rainy season, during the dry spell that occurs in or about February, and just after the rains. Between the middle of May and the middle of July the nights and early mornings are bitterly cold but the days are pleasantly cool. After the middle of July the temperature gradually rises.

The soil of the Highland is poor; the Ovimbundu industriously cultivate beans, manioc, maize, potatoes, and tobacco. Less frequently they have coffee plants, fruit trees, and sisal. Occasionally wheat is grown but the ground is not really suitable. I am told that rice could be grown in the stream valleys. Four field types are recognized by the Ovimbundu—*otjumbo* (garden), *onaka* (stream-valley garden), *ombanda* (in ground sloping up from a stream), and *epya* (a field away from the streams on level ground).[2]

Umbundu country is well supplied with water in streams and rivers, and the Ovimbundu have built irrigation channels wherever possible. Cultivation in the stream valleys, that is, of the *onaka* type of garden, has only been practised since the 1870's or 80's.[3] They are planted in August or the beginning of September, and give crops in December and January. The

[1] For an excellent account of Umbundu habitat see Childs, pp. 1–11.

[2] Albino Alves, *Dicionário Etimologico Bundo-Portuguê*, Lisbon, 1951, Vol. I, p. 659 gives ombanda as a synonym of onaka.

[3] Private information.